

Freeze hits office plans

THE Government's ban on office development permits announced this week, may have shattered plans for the controversial Tolmers Square joint commercial and housing development.

Camden's officers yesterday were still trying to assess the implications of the Environment Secretary's freeze on the issue of permits, but if the ban is permanent it could halt all present plans for the site.

Shortly before the council decided earlier this year to break off negotiations with Stock Conversion and Investment

Trust, the DoE wrote to the council saying it was prepared to grant a permit for 150,000 square feet of offices on Tolmers Square, plus another 100,000 if a suitable tenant was produced.

But the ban has apparently negated that offer.

Ironically, Camden's Community Planning and Resources Committee this week agreed that a decision on whether to go ahead with compulsory purchase orders for the site would have to be made within the next month—probably at a special joint meeting of the CP and R Committee and the Planning Committee.

Councillor Frank Dobson, leader of the council, set out a list of minimum requirements and priorities for any development, which clearly puzzled many committee members because it was not accom-

panied by any indication of whether Camden was planning to go it alone by seeking CPOs for Stock Conversion land and taking the profit from office development on the site.

The criteria he set out require about 1,500 habitable rooms of housing of a quality "to the satisfaction of the council," a home for 40 elderly people, with possibly less office space than provided under the original scheme and retention of the maximum amount of the existing fabric of the area.

The financial terms should be more favourable than those proposed by Stock Conversion and, if possible, leave Camden in direct financial control of the project—an indication that any privately sponsored non-profit development along the lines suggested by Christopher Booker and Benjie Gray is out.

A stronger hint that Camden no

longer feels itself bound by the need to show quick rather than socially desirable results on the site comes with a final priority: "Every effort should be made to secure this at the earliest possible opportunity but the timing may be subject to lower priority than the planning and financial criteria."

Mr Dobson expanded on this point in a speech to Camden Society of Architects last week. The release of Somers Town British Rail land for housing, a prospect which had whetted councils' appetites for 20 years, meant Camden was faced with a new development site close to Tolmers Square and one which could be developed far more quickly than Tolmers Square.

By giving priority to the development of the Somers Town site—and the neighbouring Maiden Lane site—Camden could gain a breathing space to negotiate with the Government over the financial future of the Tolmers Square scheme.

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